

Professional Development in North Carolina

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In the Right Context

Webster defines context as “[t]he circumstances in which an event occurs; a setting.” What Webster doesn’t define is how critical context can be and what we often do not give adequate thought to is how critical context is to planning and implementing high-quality professional development.

The North Carolina Professional Development Standards address three critical components of professional development – content, process, and context. The greatest focus is often on content or the “what” of professional development – the knowledge and skills staff members should have. Process refers to the “how” of professional development addressing how content should be delivered.

While both the content and process of professional development are significant issues worthy of a school leader’s attention, the most significant contribution a leader can make to developing others is creating an appropriate context for adult learning. It is context – the programs, procedures, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for a given school – that plays the largest role in determining whether professional development efforts will

have an impact on that school.¹ In the right school context, even flawed professional development activities (such as the much-maligned single-session workshop) can serve as a catalyst for professional growth. Conversely, in the wrong school context, even programs with solid content and powerful training strategies are unlikely to be effective.²

When school leaders recognize how critical school context is to the effectiveness of professional development, important shifts begin. The primary arena for professional development moves **from workshops to the workplace**. Emphasis shifts **from finding the right trainers or speakers to creating opportunities for staff to work together, engage in collective inquiry, and learn from one another**. The artificial distinction between teacher work and teacher learning that exists in most schools is eliminated. Opportunities for learning and growth are structured into routine practices and **professional development becomes job-embedded**. Undoubtedly this is the single most effective way in which school leaders can function as staff development leaders – by providing a school context that fosters job-embedded professional development.

Creating Context

How does school leadership create context that is supportive of professional learning and that embeds learning into the day-to-day work?

School leaders who function as staff development leaders embed collaboration in the **structure** and **culture** of their schools.

Teachers’ work is specifically designed to ensure that **every staff member is a contributing member of a collaborative team**. Creating an appropriate structure for

teacher collaboration is vitally important, but even this alone is insufficient. School

leaders must do more than organize teacher teams and hope for the best. Providing the focus, parameters, and support to help teams function effectively ensures that meaningful collaboration occurs.³

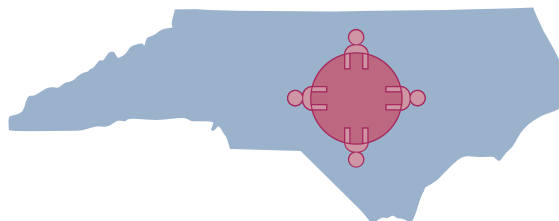


Specific Work for School Development Leaders

Specific work that school leaders can do to create context that is supportive of professional learning:

- 1. Provide time for collaboration in the school day and school year.** Providing time for teachers to work together does not require keeping students at home and/or an infusion of new resources. Principals as staff development leaders work with staff to **identify no-cost strategies** that enable teachers to work together on a regular basis while students are on campus.
- 2. Identify critical questions to guide the work of collaborative teams.** The impact of providing time for teachers to engage in collective inquiry will be determined to a great extent by the nature of the questions teachers are considering. Principals **must help teams frame questions that focus on critical issues of teaching and learning.**
- 3. Ask teams to create products as a result of their collaboration.** The best way to help teachers use their collaborative time productively is to **ask them to produce and present artifacts** in response to the critical questions they are considering.
- 4. Insist that teams identify and pursue specific student achievement goals.** The driving force behind the effort to create a collaborative culture must be improved results. Principals foster improved results when they **ask teaching teams to identify and pursue specific, measurable student achievement goals.**
- 5. Provide teams with relevant data and information.** When every teacher has **access to information** on his or her students' performance in meeting agreed upon standards, on valid assessments, in comparison to other students trying to achieve the same standards, both individual teachers and teams improve their effectiveness.

When teachers operate within the context of a learning community, they are more likely to develop professional competence. And it is principals who play the critical role in forging conditions that give rise to the growth of professional communities in schools.⁴ Eve McDermott, Director of NWREL's Education, Career, and Community program says, "Context is what makes information stick."⁵ In the case of professional development, context is what makes the learning grow, take root, and produce change in instructional thinking and practice. Leadership and resources are the other keys to providing a supportive context for teacher development – a context that will reward a school and district with the human and social benefits that result from high-quality professional development.



REFERENCES

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³DuFour, op. cit.

⁴Louis, K., Kruse, S., and Raywid, M.A. (1996). *Putting teachers at the center of reform*. NASSP Bulletin, 80(580), 9-21.

⁵North West Regional Education Lab. (2000).